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AUTHOR Puccio, Paul M.
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ABSTRACT

A survey of 50 college writing programs to ascertain what kind of training is being offered to student teachers revealed the significance of peer support and involvement and raised the following questions: (1) Can peers offer advice and support which is different from that offered by faculty and administrators? (2) Do graduate student teachers bring to their teaching a perspective which is different from that of the faculty and therefore valuable? and (3) How might graduate student teachers view their political position and their role as teachers if there were such a community of support? Although traditional modes of training such as preservice orientations and class visits by faculty are helpful, the addition of peer support in the form of class visits by peers, peer mentors, and peer involvement in writing program decisions could help immeasurably in creating communities where graduate students know that their work is creative, important, and rewarding. Peer involvement in training programs can provide a valuable and meaningful addition to an already successful program. (MHC)

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# GRADUATE INSTRUCTOR REPRESENTATION IN WRITING PROGRAMS: BUILDING COMMUNITIES THROUGH PEER SUPPORT

(Abstract)

By Paul M. Puccio

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

Drawing on a survey sent to graduate instructors at universities and colleges throughout the country, this paper first reviews the successful conventional modes of teacher training carried out by faculty and administration (e.g., credit-bearing courses, colloquia, workshops, orientation programs, etc.). The paper then argues that peer involvement in training programs can provide a valuable and meaningful addition to an already successful program. Included are descriptions of the peer training and support componants of particular writing programs (e.g. mentoring, class visits, peer-run workshops, etc.), as well as descriptions of peer representation structures. The paper concludes with a recommendation for criteria to be used for choosing peer consultants and trainers.

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# GRADUATE INSTRUCTOR REPRESENTATION IN WRITING PROGRAMS: BUILDING COMMUNITIES THROUGH PEER SUPPORT

By Paul M. Puccio

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

(Originally presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 19 March 1988, St. Louis Missouri)

No one would deny our students' need for sensitive, perceptive, and challenging writing teachers. We all know that such teachers are not shaped overnight, that training (both preparatory and ongoing) is a necessary part of the teacher's experience. Moreover, it is true that because most freshman composition teachers are graduate students, there is often an intensified need to offer comprehensive and continuing training to these teachers who are frequently first-time instructors. These TAs are not only generally less experienced than most faculty; they have the added burden of being students as well as teachers, they do not have job security, and they often are closer in age to the students they teach (making for problems with authority and professional distance). In short, they have more questions and they need more support. Robert Diamond and Peter Gray, in their National Study of Teaching Assistants (Syracuse University, 1987), come to the

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same conclusion. Remarking on the significant position of graduate student instructors throughout the university, a position which is especially true in freshman writing programs, Diamond and Gray state:

> Graduate teaching assistants play a major role in most research universities. In addition to representing a large proportion of the graduate students enrolled in many academic departments, this group is responsible for much of the teaching and supervision that goes on in the initial two years of undergraduate education. Although no hard data exist, it has been estimated that from 30 to 50% of an undergraduate's contact hours in the freshman and sophomore years at research universities are with teaching assistants. . . . And yet, as important as graduate assistants are to the health and well being of their institutions, the resources being dedicated to their support and training are extrememly limited (59).

Most freshman writing programs offer their graduate student teachers some pre-service and in-service training, but many of us (both graduate students and administrators) feel that this training is often inadequate. Moreover, even those TAs who are satisfied with the training available to them may still need a more extensive support system. However well-trained we may be, what is often lacking in our experiences as teachers is the sense of community which derives from knowing that we share concerns, goals, and problems with our peers, as well as the security which results from knowing that we can share our experiences with our colleagues.

This paper proposes that peer involvement in both training and support can be at least as valuable to new TAs as the more customary faculty and administrative training. Through a survey which I sent to writing programs at 50 universities and colleges across the country, I have been able to examine several different types of training programs. As a result of this, I have developed these questions for us to consider: Can peers offer to new teachers, as well as experienced teachers and even faculty, kinds of advice and support which are different from those which faculty and administration can offer? Do graduate student teachers introduce a perspective on the program, the writing courses, and the students which is distinctive from the faculty perspective but which is valuable for this very reason? And, how might all graduate student teachers understand their political position in the program and their role as teachers if there were such a community of help and support?

Before I offer some of the forms of peer training and support which have been developed by writing programs, I'd like to review the more successful conventional modes of teacher training which are carried out by faculty and administrators. It will come as no surprise that nearly every writing program offers a pre-service orientation (some a week-long, some a morning-long), as well as a credit-bearing course in composition and class visits made by faculty. At those universities where there are faculty engaged in research in composition theory, colloquia or workshops on composition theory, teaching materials, or particular teaching questions are also offered. The conventional wisdom which is implied here is that faculty and

administrators can best educate, train, and evaluate graduate student teachers. Indeed, many (but not all) of the graduate students who responded to my survey indicate that these componants of their training programs do reflect their questions, concerns, and needs.

I am here arguing that peer involvement in a training program can provide a valuable and meaningful addition to an already successful training program. The most popular forms of peer involvement in writing programs are the Resource File (a compendium of successful assignments and activities which other TAs have developed or adapted for use in their classes) and the Orientation Get-together of new and experienced teachers, during which the new teachers ask the experienced ones every question which they ever had about teaching or about their program (and I mean everything from pedagogical concerns to the location of the nearest coffee maker). Many programs also encourage or structure class visits made by peers; according to my survey, these visits can be as helpful or even more helpful than faculty visits. Larger programs (of 30 TAs or more) commonly have a peer mentor system, in which a new teacher is paired with a more experienced one; the two often visit each other's classes, meet to discuss problems and successes, and generally create a kind of academic buddy system. In programs where there are graduate students specializing in composition theory, colloquia and workshops are sometimes designed and run by these students.

Several programs have developed highly structured peer training and support componants, as well as forums for graduate student representation within programs. Pat Belanoff at SUNY--Stony Brook

believes that it is important "to encourage the growth of a supportive community among graduate students [because] Graduate study tends to enhance anxiety and alienation." According to graduate student teachers at Stony Brook, this program succeeds in meeting Professor Belanoff's goal of creating community; their responses to my questionnaire were positive, indicating that the peer mentoring available to them was especially helpful.

At Stony Brook, graduate student teachers serve on committees and are visible within the infrastructure of the program itself. The Writing Program director has a graduate assistant, usually a student specializing in composition theory; this graduate assistant serves as the chair of the Exam Committee, is present at staff meetings (offering a student voice in program decisions), and mentors new TAs as well. At the University of Arizona, the Writing Program director has three graduate assistants; among their other responsibilities is the preparation of a handbook of policies, teaching aids, and directories called "A Teacher's Guide to Freshman Composition."

In addition to the one-on-one mentoring which many programs offer, some have designated peer-consultants who advise and assist new TAs. At UCLA, there are "master TAs" who observe new teachers in the classroom, are themselves observed by new TAs, and may be invited by the new TAs to watch with them their videotaped classes. Stuart C. Brown at the University of Arizona describes a similar componant in this Writing Program: "Of critical importance are our supervisors (instructors and experienced graduate instructors) who work with a small group (four to five) for two semesters. These supervisors act as

mentors as well as constructive evaluators." The Writing Program at the University of Pittsburgh has developed a Committee for the Evaluation and Advancement of Teaching which, according to a graduate student teacher there, consists of one composition faculty member and three experienced graduate instructors. Members of this committee visit TAs' classes and hold conferences with them to discuss teaching strategies and offer advice for improvement. They also hold regular staff meetings for collective discussion of pedagogical and practical issues.

Most program instructors, however, are forced to depend on the informal contact between teachers which results from sharing offices, meeting socially, and being determined to find help and support someplace. One TA complained that there was no pedagogical unity in her program, that she never received any help with her teaching except when she was in her office which she shared with all the other TAs; otherwise, it was like "teaching in a void." Another TA who taught in a small program (25 TAs) remarked that, "If problems arose, we could discuss them with the director. Generally, however, we consulted other TAs." A respondent to the Diamond and Gray Survey wrote: "Our English department has an extensive pedagogy class before we teach Freshman English--this course focuses on the material of teaching writing (which is helpful) but not really on class dynamics, teaching effectiveness, etc. What I have learned has primarily been from other TAs as we grope our way through" (74).

Sometimes, graduate student teachers must seek their own training and support, filling in the gaps left by the formal training available. Pardon me as I venture outside our discipline for a moment to share

this remark made by a Mechanical Engineering TA who took the Diamond and Gray Survey: "The best TA supervisor I've had was another TA who was teaching a lower level course. She held weekly meetings where TAs were responsible to be prepared (for [the] weeks's assignment), and she also made sure we understood the assignment by the end of the meeting even if we didn't at first. Most professors don't take that effort with TAs" (35). Perhaps the most eloquent testament to peer support which I have seen is this response which I received as an addendum to the questionnaire which I distributed:

> From the number of check marks I made on the front of this sheet, it appears as though the department offers sufficient support of the teaching of composition. I must qualify that. Most of the support I have received in the last three years with my teaching has come from other graduate students. The faculty who have observed me range from non-committal to disinterested. Only in one case has a 'mentor' expressed less knowledge than I. In all cases I can safely say I held more knowledge and interest in the teaching of writing. As graduate students we have instigated peer teaching groups which meet infrequently to discuss grades, classroom methods, teaching methodologies and theories.

This TA goes on to say that her optimism regarding her writing program rests with the rhetoric faculty and "with the graduate students in rhetoric, as well. Never did I imagine the community which would take

shape among a group of students at the M.A. and Ph. D. level. We understand our discipline, respect the work that we're doing, and realize the worthwhileness of our pursuits, despite the position our profession holds within this particular department."

Before I finish, I should at least address some of the reasons why many writing programs do not integrate peer support into their training componants. The director of a small writing program (with 20 TAs) commented: "We only have a two-year M.A. program, and therefore are unable to use experienced graduate student instructors in training and mentoring other [instructors]." I should think that this will be a fairly common challenge to the proposals I have been making, but I suggest that we all recall the differences between our first and second years of teaching, the many options we learned in just two semesters, the confidence we gained in such a short time. I am certainly not claiming that a second-year TA or even a third- or fourth-year TA is an expert at teaching, but after one year a TA does accumulate experiences which he or she can offer a new TA. Faculty and administrators do not seem to be as uneasy when a specialist in literature supervises a new TA in the teaching of composition, a course which the faculty member may be teaching for the first time in his or her career. Of course, there are "teaching universals," advice and guidance which any experienced teacher can give a novice, but there are also concerns and questions which are particular to the composition classroom, and an experienced TA can address these concerns at least as well as a faculty member who has never taught a writing course.

Few people will admit it, but there often lurks a mild lack of trust in graduate student teachers. Administrators understandably ask themselves in the dark of the night, "Can that first year graduate student really teach a class of 20 freshman?" And yet, according to Dolores Schriner and Lillian Back's Survey, "Training Programs for Teaching Assistants," presented at the 1987 CCCC, 77% of the freshman composition courses taught are taught by TAs. Writing Program administrators are clearly willing to trust graduate student teachers in the classroom; if these teachers can be qualified enough to be the sole authority figure in a class, to comment effectively on student writing, and even, in some cases, to design the curricula for their classes, why not admit that they have useful and creative suggestions to share with other TAs? One of Diamond and Gray's recommendations is that "faculty assigned to supervise teaching assistants be selected for their discipline expertise, teaching effectiveness, and willingness to work with the teaching assistants in their improvement" (63). It is often not feasible for a department to offer enough faculty supervisors who are so prepared and interested in teaching composition; yet, there may be graduate student teachers who are not only knowledgeable of, but eager to share and discuss, teaching options. I suggest that if administrators use Diamond and Gray's criteria when choosing TAs to serve as mentors and trainers, they will create successful peer componants in their training programs.

I believe that peer training and support systems can help create communities where graduate students know that their work is creative, important, and rewarding. The term "TA" will be recognized as the misnomer it is when used in most writing programs, and teaching will no place be viewed (as one graduate student instructor observed) "as something a gifted amateur can do with a little effort." We will not only have better teachers, we will help all teachers understand their major role within the profession.